

FRACTURES



by
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by Alessa

In the depths of her tormented sleep, ten-year-old Colette heard the wind scream like a woman being slashed. She wanted to wake up, but her efforts were futile. The clutches of the nightmare held her firmly in their grip.

"Pick a card, any card," cooed the magician of sinister charm and intentions. His voice was deceptive and oily, a wheedling promise of cunning artfulness. A tall hat perched atop his head, contrasting against the frayed white gloves that clung to his fingertips. His face looked as yellow as putrid mayonnaise. A peculiar scent wafted from his breath—an amalgamation of fruity sweetness and bitter undertones of marmalade. He leaned down towards Colette, offering the cards in his gloved hand, spread out enticingly like a peacock's tail.

Anxiety gripped Colette, casting shadows of doubt over her every thought. The magician's unnerving grin bared a multitude of teeth, so sharp that she thought he was going to rend flesh from her bones.

"Which one?" Colette asked, her voice quivering, fearing a trick.

"Any one!" he retorted, his grin transforming into a fierce visage that threatened to consume her.

With trepidation, Colette reached out towards the array of cards, her mind fraught with uncertainty. Which card held the key to her salvation?

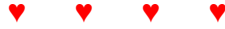
"Gotcha!" a wicked cry of the magician tore through the air before she could make her choice. He flung the cards high into the heavens. All the colours of the rainbow, all the designs her imagination could conceive, scattering like clouds of liberated butterflies, painting the sky with a kaleidoscope of colours, and swirling around like gaudy leaves cast to the wind. She saw fragments of places, names, and faces hurtle past—some that she didn't recognise and some that were school friends, neighbours, and family.

Colette's mind recoiled. She felt like gazing at a distorted world, viewing its wonders through the eyes of a lunatic. Reality twisted and turned, stripped of its logical order, cascading into chaotic disarray.

Overwhelmed, Colette's fragile form sank to her knees with a cry of dismay, desperate to gather the cards and put them back in their proper order. She grabbed for the elusive cards, but they slipped through her fingers, eluding her grasp like quicksilver.

In her despair, she resorted to prayer. Her fervent pleas rose from her lips, a desperate plea for order in the face of the unyielding chaos.

The magician laughed at her. An unhinged symphony rang out in mocking response, merging with his chilling screams into a discordant shrill of malevolence and triumph.



Colette awoke with a gasp, her heart pounding like the wings of a startled raven, when the nightmare released its grip on her mind. But her relief was short-lived, for the shriek of a furious Mistral greeted her, tearing through the tranquillity of her hometown with a relentless fury. The fierce cold wind that blew down onto the valley of her hometown from the western slope of the Alps in the winter and spring sounded like a hundred freight trains thundering past as it rocked and pummelled the house.

Living in Saint-Vallier of the northern Rhône Valley, Colette had heard the Mistral before—the wild wind that blew off loose roof tiles and rattled the windowpanes in their frames. It terrified her—the way it rushed past the house as if nature itself had transformed into something savage and uncontrollable, diabolical in its frenzy.

Colette felt her helplessness overwhelm her. Her heart clenched in fear as the wind raged outside, a manifestation of anger and purpose akin to a madman wielding a ball-peen hammer to pound the roof while he tittered and hissed.

Seeking solace, Colette sought refuge under her covers, pulling them over her head as if they could shield her from the tempest's wrath. She found comfort in chewing on the tip of one canary-yellow braid, a habit she'd picked up when she was very small, and her brother Jules mercilessly teased her for sucking her thumb. She hated herself for acting like a little kid—*I'm almost grownup*, she reminded herself—but tonight, the Mistral's assault seemed worse than any she had ever endured, and it reduced her to a quivering child.

The wind was shaking and battering the house now, violently seeking entry. The bed trembled beneath her, and the floor itself seemed to moan in response to the wind's aggression. As her nerves succumbed to fear, she could no longer suppress her panic. In a crescendo of terror, she cried out for her parents, hoping their presence would somehow dispel the nightmare that had become all too real. But no one came.

She yelled for her brother Jules, whose room was right next to hers, desperate for any sign of life, but silence greeted her ears. The raging wind seemed to have swallowed her words whole, carrying them away like lost souls in the howling night.

Maybe they can't hear me for the wind.

She pushed herself out of bed and raced to her brother's room, then to her parents'. The dishevelled beds bore signs of recent use, but they were empty.

Fear slithered through her like a malevolent serpent, its icy grip coiling around her throat and descending into the pit of her belly. The house quivered under the relentless assault of the wind, shaking as though trapped in the grasp of a furious salt shaker. If the merciless onslaught continued, Colette dreaded the consequences. She feared that the windows and doors would be torn asunder, her family and herself cast out into the storm like so many grains of white salt scattered to the winds.

Her vision blurred. Smearly colours dripped from the ceiling and streamed down the walls, as if reality itself were melting away like paint in the rain. Colette's own flesh seemed to be liquefying into long, goopy strands. Her bones felt as flimsy as Styrofoam, as though she were about to be tossed high into the air, surrendered to the whims of chance like one of the cards she'd seen in her nightmare, to land where the winds of destiny blew it.

Colette felt a terrifying similarity between her dream and her current reality. As the howling winds screamed outside, it was as though she, too, had been cast into the unpredictable gales of fate. The boundary between dreams and waking life blurred, and she questioned whether she had slipped into another layer of the dream world or whether this was, in fact, reality itself unravelling.

She knew only one way to protect herself. She shut her eyes and tried to duplicate the trick she'd used years ago when she got into trouble for losing the house key she took with her to school and her Papa had yelled and shook his finger at her: she pretended her head was a TV set, and she clicked it off, and unplugged it.

Then she was safe. Or had seemed to be.

She'd listened to Papa's angry words and tried to convince herself it wasn't real; it was only an illusion.

She escaped that way now, her consciousness sliding out of the spot between her eyebrows and drifting up through the shifting colours and shimmery walls into the overpowering screech of the Mistral.

Out the window, she could see roof tiles and trash can tops, children's toys sailing high in the air, spinning in the moonlight. They looked like bright, shiny paper cards.



Colette's sleep had been akin to a gauzy twilight, where dreams swirled like phantoms instead of stars. In that hazy realm, she found herself inside the school gymnasium, her arms straining as she attempted push-ups. A formidable figure stood before her—a squinty-eyed woman with sparse lips and a chin that seemed to have melted away. The woman's stern voice pierced the air, demanding Colette quicken her pace. "I can't; leave me alone!" Colette retorted, her frustration bubbling forth.

But her defiance only seemed to ignite the woman's ire further. Like a wicked witch from a storybook, the woman seized Colette's braids and yanked her head back, her sharp nose resembling that of a hawk hunting prey. Her words cut like a nail file scraping against glass, ordering Colette to proceed straight to the principal's office without delay.

In an instant, Colette was jolted wide awake, as though someone had snapped their fingers inside her head.

She sat up.

The Mistral's violent symphony outside had finally quieted. She was alone in the unsettling stillness that now enveloped the house. She glanced at the clock, hoping for reassurance, and saw that it was just past seven, its digital display marking the passage of time with unyielding precision.

Yet, despite the clock's reassuring tick, the very essence of the house seemed to have halted in some mysterious manner. The morning, which should have been alive with the clatter of breakfast dishes and the familiar sounds of her family, felt eerily absent. There were no doors being slammed, no newspapers being folded, and no signs of life that she had come to expect.

The silence thickened like a fog, suffusing the air with a dense, pregnant stillness. It was as though the world had gone mute, the vibrations of a great bell tolling in a deaf ear, resounding but unheard.

Colette's thoughts drifted back to the previous night, the memory of empty beds in her parents' and brother's rooms haunting her mind. Though she hoped they had returned in the calm after the storm, doubt gnawed at her like a hungry rat. An unsettling memory surfaced—one her older cousin Louise had teased her with when she was much younger. Louise's cruel words had carried a terrifying threat: that if Colette ever misbehaved, her family would vanish in the dead of night, leaving her behind.

Though she knew Louise had been playing a mean game back then, those taunting words now resurfaced like ghosts of old fears. What if, by some unthinkable twist of fate, Louise's words had held an ounce of truth? What if her family had truly departed, leaving her alone in a world that suddenly seemed far colder and unfamiliar?

The tendrils of uncertainty wound tighter around Colette's heart, and she knew that she had to venture forth from the safety of her room to seek answers. She stepped forward, her bare feet guiding her through the empty rooms. As her trembling hand reached for the doorknob, she steeled herself for what she might discover.

"Mama?" Colette's whisper carried an anxious tremor, a plea for the familiar comfort she had always found in her mother's presence.

No reply echoed back, and the silence seemed to mock her. "Mama! Papa! Where is everybody?" Her voice grew louder, desperate for any sign of life.

She checked her parents' and Jules's bedrooms, but they remained untouched, devoid of any human presence. Even the kitchen, where at this time of day Mama would be cleaning up the breakfast dishes, maybe nibbling a waffle or piece of toast that somebody'd left on their plate.

The silence that now shrouded the house felt suffocating, dense like freshly turned earth, stirring with creepy-crawlers and worms wriggling beneath the surface. Colette could hardly bear it. It felt as if she had been cast inside a coffin of soundlessness.

Colette slipped on her jacket and secured her fanny pack around her waist. She packed within it her meagre treasures—a bit of allowance money, a hairbrush, Tooty-Fruity Lipgloss, Tazos, and some photos from a family trip to Mont Saint-Michel, which she was planning to show Monique Dumont, a girl in her school she was starting to like.

She rushed next door to the neighbours', her little fists banging on the door, shouting 'hello!' Yet the houses, like crypts, stood in Stoic silence. Not a single soul answered her tearful screams. Not even a dog yapped. It seemed as though the entire world had been swallowed by an unfathomable stillness.

Colette started to run. She ran through the vacant streets in search of any sign of life. She hurried to Saint-Vallier school, but she already knew... she *knew*... The playground, once filled with laughter and play, lay barren and forsaken. As Colette gazed through the classroom windows, a chill crept down her spine. They were eerily deserted, void of the bustle that typified a normal school day.

For an instant, standing amidst the shards of a shattered bottle, Colette peered through the window into the desolate gymnasium, and a memory rose from the depths of her mind like a forgotten dream resurfacing. It was a dream where she lay on her tummy, sweaty and exhausted, attempting to do push-ups, while a witch in blue shorts and pristine white tennis shoes barked commands at her. The image startled her, like a ghostly apparition revealing itself at the edge of her consciousness.

But the memories didn't end there; they cascaded forth, revealing more pieces of the elusive puzzle. Colette recalled the scorn she had felt, scrawling a sharp-tongued poem about the witch on the wall of the girl's restroom. The vivid imagery, with its colourful disdain, stirred an uneasy feeling in her. Then came the consequences: trudging through the school halls, burdened by guilt, and finding herself at the principal's office—a place where her world seemed to shrink under the stern gaze of a frowning secretary, whose lips bore the bubblegum hue of artificial sweetness. The secretary's call to Colette's parents felt like a sentencing, the beginning of an ordeal she desperately wished to forget.

But now, confronted by these recollections, a seed of doubt took root. Had it all been a dream, a mere figment of her overactive imagination?

Colette's gaze wandered over the abandoned school grounds and the silent, empty streets that once teemed with life. Her hand reached down to retrieve a sharp-edged piece of glass from the ground. Her eyes closed. She thrust the jagged fragment into the tender flesh of her palm, and a sudden jolt of pain seared through her being. The crimson bloom of blood materialised in her palm like a rose plucked from the air by a magician.

But she didn't wake up. The realisation crashed upon her like a wave—her family, her friends, the entire world, had vanished, leaving her stranded in a realm of solitude so profound it felt almost sacred.

They've really all gone. The whole world has disappeared. I'm all alone.

The prospect of enduring such an incomprehensible aloneness stretched before her like an abyss, an eternal emptiness where she would be stripped of every connection that made life meaningful. Never to see her parents again, never to share laughter with her brother. Never to hear a human voice except her own.

In her hand, she still clutched the piece of glass, its edges sharp. The darkness that now surrounded her seemed to whisper in her ear, urging her towards a choice she had never imagined making. It was a sin, she knew, but God would have to understand.

Colette collapsed onto the bench at the desolate bus stop, her anguish erupting in uncontrollable sobs that seemed to wring every last ounce of strength from her. The unforgiving cold wrapped around her like a shawl of ice, seeping into her bones. The yowling Mistral, ever relentless, began to howl once more, its fury tearing through the air. Trash swirled in chaotic patterns, and gritty debris from the playground assaulted her tear-streaked face.

As Colette's surroundings blurred and bent like rubber toys, everything seemed to be losing its substance, turning to shadow and smoke before her eyes. The school and the houses that once stood steadfast now seemed ephemeral. The world she had known was slipping away, leaving her stranded in a surreal landscape that defied all reason.

Mistral kicked gravel at Colette as she sought refuge under the shelter of the nearest house, huddling beneath its porch to escape the relentless wind. Her jacket provided little solace, but she clung to it, shielding her face from the barrage of elements.

Her mind toyed with the idea of surrendering herself to the wind, of surrendering to its whims and letting it sweep her away, as though her very existence had become a futile game of chance. But she couldn't bring herself to commit such a reckless act. She was afraid to find out where the wind might take her.

The wind shrieked like a witch with a toothache. It filled every crevice, penetrating her ears, and echoing inside her mind like shards of blood-red, glassy sand. It was as though the wind sought to claim every inch of her, to sweep her away like an errant leaf caught in a storm.

Please don't take me away, too, she pleaded with the tempestuous wind, her thoughts forming an unspoken prayer, and that was the last thing she knew.



Pick a card, any card, the magician's voice sang with sly allure. Colette wasn't so sure she was dreaming this time. The magician presented her with a wide fan of cards, each gleaming like polished tiles, resembling exquisite stained-glass windows that captured the light and held it within their gem-like brilliance.

Pick a card, the magician urged once more.

Colette hesitated for a moment, a whisper of suspicion curling in the back of her mind. Would she pick the wrong card? Was the trick rigged in such a way that the card she sought, the "Colette card," was not even part of the deck? Perhaps she alone had clung to her card during the terrible wind that had swept away everything and everyone she had ever known.

As these thoughts swirled within her, Colette's heart pounded, her hand trembling as she reached out to make her choice. The magician's façade now felt transparent, his leering face morphing into something far more sinister.

The magician hopped up and down like a maddened toad. The cards were cast down, end to end, forming a shimmering road paved with jewels, snaking away into an unknown horizon.

Pick a card! Pick a card! Pick a card!



Colette woke up beneath the porch of the strange house, hugging her knees to her chest. Her hand throbbed where she had deliberately cut herself. The wound was covered with a crust of dried blood.

She listened. And her heart leaped with hope because she could tell that the world had returned. Cars were rolling by in the street. Children played ball. Somewhere, a radio was playing, and a couple of women were chatting about the prices at the local market.

Everything sounded like it was supposed to, the way it had sounded before.

Why, then, was she still so afraid?

Gathering her strength, Colette stretched her tired muscles and began her journey back home—or what used to be her home. She turned east on La Brassière and walked north for four blocks on Rue des Malles until she got to her house. But as she approached her own house, she noticed a peculiar car parked in the driveway that didn't belong to her family. For a moment, she wondered if they had visitors, perhaps offering refuge to someone displaced by the windstorm.

With resolve, Colette climbed the steps to her front door, but when she rang the bell, a strange trill responded, startling her. The door creaked open to reveal a woman she had never seen before—a big-boned, blond woman with warm smile lines etched around her eyes, and a side tooth conspicuously missing. Her long, fake nails were polished a shade that brought to mind the comforting aroma of cinnamon buns. The woman peered at Colette, clearly taken aback.

"Élise," she said. "What are you doing home from school this time of day?" Her voice had a soft, unfamiliar drawl. "Are you sick or something?"

Colette blinked, trying to make sense of the situation, but the woman's words only deepened her confusion. Who was Élise? And why did this stranger mistake her for someone else?

"Well, come on in the kitchen. I just took a tray of brownies out of the oven. You can tell me what's going on while we eat."

Colette bit her lip to keep from crying. Did she have the wrong house? Could it be that the woman was simply mistaking her for her daughter, Élise? She followed the stranger into the kitchen.

But it wasn't the wrong house; it was her house, Colette realised, right down to the hat tree in the hall and the dark, star-shaped stain on the rug in the dining room where Jules had once spilled a mug of hot cocoa. Except for the furniture... the furniture was all wrong. It was flowery stuff with bright patterns

and ruffled lamps, whereas theirs had been pale blue and white French Provincial. And in the kitchen was a big butcher block table and a cage with two parakeets in it instead of the TV that Mama liked to watch while she cooked.

"I... I think I must have the wrong house." Colette's voice trembled as she spoke.

The blond woman looked up from slicing the brownies, her eyes narrowing with confusion. "Oh, come on, it hasn't been that long since I baked brownies."

"No, I mean really... who lives here?" Colette pressed, her skittishness mounting.

"Élise, that's not funny anymore. I don't care for sarcasm, okay?" The woman's voice held an edge of impatience.

Colette's heart sank as she realised that her identity had been entirely usurped by this mysterious "Élise." A sense of displacement gnawed at her, and she felt like an observer in her own life.

Just then, a man barged into the kitchen through the back door, his presence as imposing as a mountain. A full, reddish beard adorned his jowls and chin, and he loomed over Colette like a formidable figure from a tall tale.

"Hey, Élise, what are you doing home?" The man asked, his gruff voice reverberating through the room. "You been sent home for sassing your PE teacher again?"

"I... I'm not Élise. My name is Colette," she replied, feeling small and uncertain in the face of this colossal presence.

The woman sighed, dismissing Colette's words. "She's in a mood, being smart-assed."

The man's scowl deepened, and his demeanour held a sternness that seemed both intimidating and familiar to Colette. "Now you know what I told you would happen if you got sent home from school again. I don't care if you hate PE; you gotta take it to graduate. Did you get punished with push-ups again?"

Colette stood her ground, her fear clawing up her spine like a relentless parade of cockroaches. Her tongue felt dry and swollen. She drew herself up and tried to speak in the clear, strong voice of the trial attorney she hoped to be when she grew up.

"I don't know who you are or what you're talking about. My name's Colette Lavigne, and this is my home. I demand to know what you've done with my parents, Marie and Claude Lavigne, and my older brother, Jules Lavigne. Where are they? Who are you? And what have you done with them?"

Her words hung heavy in the air, and the man and woman stared at her with a mix of confusion and disbelief. The woman, trying to grasp the situation, stammered first, "Élise, honey, what—"

But the man's impatience cut her off with a sharp edge to his voice, "What are you talking about? What the hell is this—some kind of game? Who the hell are these Lavigne people?"

Determined to prove her identity, Colette reached into her fanny pack and retrieved a treasured photo—a snapshot of Mama and Papa and Jules taken the month before during their trip to Mont Saint-Michel. She'd taken it with her favourite Christmas present, an instant Polaroid camera.

"These are my parents and my brother," she asserted, holding out the photo for them to see. "They're supposed to be living here. What have you done with them?"

The blond woman had set down her glasses and walked around the table and examined the photo, frowning in contemplation. She showed it to the man, and they exchanged puzzled glances.

Then the man shrugged and started unbuckling his belt with hairy, thick-knuckled hands.

"You got one more chance to explain yourself, Élise," he growled, his voice thick with menace. "Cut out this foolishness, or I swear, you ain't too old to take upstairs; you ain't too old to—"

"Martin, please," said the woman.

"Now, Sylvie, just stop; let me handle this, okay? I don't know what damn fool game she's playing or where she got that picture, but—"

"Martin, I don't think it's a game." Sylvie's compassionate instincts compelled her to believe that something more than a mere charade was unfolding before them. "I think... Élise, just talk to me. Tell me what's going on."

Colette took a deep breath. Her nerves were on edge, fluttering like a swarm of butterflies taking flight. This was her chance to make them understand—to convince them that she was not Élise, but Colette. Her resolve strengthened, she searched Sylvie's eyes for any sign of understanding, hoping to find a glimmer of recognition in the depths of her gaze.

"I don't know how or why this has happened," Colette began, her voice unwavering. "But somehow, something has shifted in the world, and everything is different. My family, my home—it's all changed, and I'm lost. I woke up today, and it was like stepping into a nightmare. Please, you have to believe me. I'm not Élise. My name is Colette, and I need to find my way back home!"

The woman reached out to Colette, trying to put her hands around the little girl.

"Don't touch me!" Colette scratched the strange woman across the cheek. The woman yelped as pain pierced her skin. The man bellowed. Colette dashed for the door.

Colette's heart pounded in her chest, her breaths coming in ragged gasps as she plunged into the street and dashed through the unfamiliar neighbourhood, desperate to escape the strangers in her home. The adrenaline coursing through her veins gave her the strength to push her fear aside and react instinctively to the danger at hand, but after calming down, she bit her lip again to keep from crying.

Afternoon shadows crawled over Colette's hiding place. Her heartbeats drummed in her ears, drowning out the sound of her own breathing. It had been over an hour since she heard the man and the woman calling for her. She crawled out from under the bushes.

A white dog wearing a green collar and tags approached Colette. She recognised the dog at once: Felix, the Beaufort's beloved Scottish terrier, who could catch a mean Frisbee despite his short legs and stout body. Colette fed him and walked him whenever the Beauforts went out of town.

She dropped to her knees.

"Felix, come here. Are you lost, too?" Colette called out, hoping for some semblance of companionship in this bewildering world.

Felix flattened his ears. His snarl looked like a smaller version of a pit bull ready for battle. Colette stood up and jumped backward as Felix sprang. His pint-sized killer-dog teeth pierced her pink socks and punched through the skin of her ankle.

Colette screamed and kicked Felix away. He came at her again. She ran to a parked car and climbed onto the trunk. She waited there until Felix lost interest and wandered away, then her tears flowed. Felix had been like her own dog.

She climbed down from the car hood. Her leg hurt and felt weird. She looked down and saw blood on her sock.

As Colette stood there, nursing her bleeding ankle, she noticed a mailman turning the corner up ahead. It was a skinny, olive-skinned man—not the regular mailman, Monsieur Gauthier—but in her desperation, she ran up to him, hoping he might be able to offer some guidance or assistance.

"Do you know where my family is? My parents, Marie and Claude Lavigne, and my brother, Jules? I'm lost, and I don't know what's happening."

The olive-skinned mailman stuffed a handful of letters into a mailbox and tugged on the fat lobe of an ear that stuck out from the side of his head like a miniature satellite dish. "Élise Moreau, I just passed your folks a few blocks from here, and they're looking for you. Your dad, he looked mad. I'd head back home if—Élise, Élise wait, where you goin'? Didn't you hear what I said? Your parents are looking for you! Hey, what happened to your foot?"

Colette darted across the street and ran through several backyards until she could no longer hear him yelling. Her heart was pounding the way it did the summer before when she had to go off the high diving board at the public pool and then just stood there, toes wrapped over the edge, looking down into the terrible bottomless blue.

The name "Élise Moreau" tugged at the fringes of her memory like a whisper of a forgotten melody. But she was not Élise Moreau, and yet, everything around her seemed to suggest otherwise.

She was hungry and thirsty. There were four euros and change in her jeans pocket, but she didn't dare walk to the convenience store up the street for fear the strange people who thought they were her parents would be there.

Assuming, of course, the convenience store was still where she remembered it to be. Maybe that had changed, too. And maybe her mind was altered, too, making her have memories about being punished in gym class that really belonged to some girl named Élise Moreau.

That was the scariest notion of all.

Colette found herself in an unfamiliar neighborhood, surrounded by tall, close-spaced apartment buildings with tiny yards. As she ventured further, a group of girls playing basketball on a litter-strewn court caught her eye. They had sleek, coltish muscles and conversed in a language Colette did not understand. Even the street signs were now inscribed in a script she didn't recognise, a language that was not French.

At the corner, she peered through the window of a small grocery store. The bins displayed peculiar fruits and tuberous vegetables she had never seen before—fat, bulbous yellow fruits and elongated, tuberous things that could have been either gigantic string beans or monstrous, deformed melons. The signs identifying these items were written in a fanciful puzzle of red letters resembling small houses connected by various slashes and strokes, running up and down, not left and right.

Colette peered in and squinted.

Just then, a figure emerged from the shop—it was her Grandma Gisele, who hobbled to the door of the shop and stared out. Part of her face hung lopsided, like she was made of Play-Doh that somebody'd stretched out to make a funny-ugly face. That was the result of Grandma's stroke the year before. Without hesitation, Colette rushed to fling her arms around the old woman.

"Grandma Gisele? Grandma Gisele, it's me! It's Colette."

The old lady acted like Colette had puked on her. She jabbed the knob of her cane into Colette's chest, hissing spittle and strange words at Colette. The syllables stretched and melded together, like Grandma Gisele's face.

Tears welled up in Colette's eyes, her voice trembling as she pleaded with her grandmother. "Grandma, why are you talking like that? Please try to speak so I can understand you. It's me, Colette. Don't you recognise me?"

The old woman chattered and glowered and banged Colette on the shin with her cane. Colette squealed. A man with round owlsh eyes and a mouth like a slit in a piggy bank rushed to the scene, pulling the Grandma Gisele person away from the door.

"Did you hit that girl? Did you?" he scolded the old woman. "Good Christ, Marie, you senile old bag, do you want to get us sued again?"

The old woman continued her gibberish, unfazed by the commotion she had caused. Meanwhile, Colette's heart pounded in her ears, her shin stinging from the impact of the cane.

"Are you all right, Mademoiselle?" The slit-mouthed man asked, his eyes filled with concern. "She didn't hurt you, did she? No problem here, right? Okay?"

Colette shook her head, stepping back as if to keep a safe distance from the odd scene unfolding before her. She was hesitant to trust anyone in this strange place.

"Come here and let me take a look at your leg," the man said, wiggling his slim, spidery fingers towards her. "*Come here.*"

Colette ran.

The strange part of town with the people who spoke funny words began to peter out, but the roads here were no less unfamiliar, narrow and two-laned, leading into an abyss of darkness. The streets were deserted, and the horizon felt as flat and impenetrable as the edge of a ruler.

Colette tried not to wonder what had become of Saint-Vallier, whose familiar buildings could normally be seen silhouetted against the sky like some distant magical kingdom.

As she walked, her heart skipped a beat when a familiar-looking brown convertible approached. It was Renée Blanc's car—the very same one she could never forget. The last time she'd sat in it had been when Renée dropped her off home from school.

Behind the wheel sat red-haired Renée Blanc, Colette's young history teacher. Colette had always liked Renée, and she held a special place in her heart. Renée was a pretty, pale-faced girl whose hobby was jigsaw puzzles and collecting seashells from her summer vacations. Colette liked Renée. She'd spent two weeks with her once when Mama and Papa had some difficulties and split up temporarily, and Mama said she needed time to herself "to think." During that time, Renée had taught Colette how to make pies from scratch, how to play chess, and how to kiss. So when Renée pulled the car to a stop alongside her, Colette was so happy to see her that she got in without saying a word.

"Is it... is it really Colette Lavigne... or are you some other girl now?" said Renée hesitantly, her voice betraying both hope and concern.

Colette jumped at the sound of her own name as though it were something foreign to her. "Yes, yes! It's Colette! I can't find my parents or my brother. I don't even know where I am anymore, and I'm hungry, and my foot's hurt, and everything's changed. Can you help me?"

Renée studied Colette's face as though searching for an answer hidden beneath her skin. "Yes, of course, Colette. I'll help you. Come home with me first; I'll get you something to eat." Her voice trembled, small and strained slightly as she helped Colette put the seatbelt on.

They arrived at a different house from the one Colette remembered—a gawky frame house with a majestic oak tree in the front yard—but Colette didn't remark on this.

Inside, the familiarity of Renée's ongoing jigsaw puzzles greeted Colette, just like she always did whenever Colette had visited her at the old house, wherever that was now. First, they headed for the bathroom, where Renée took off Colette's pink sock from her injured foot.

"How did this happen, honey?" She asked incredulously.

"Felix bit me. I think he was angry at me, but I never did anything to him."

After washing her ankle, Renée carefully placed a bandage on it and gave her a pair of her own satin slippers to wear. Then she laid out a plate of chicken, salad, and potato chips, and they sat at the dining room table.

Colette's hunger was insatiable as she devoured the food, almost as if it were her first taste of sustenance in days.

"Do your parents know where you are?" Renée asked, her voice filled with genuine concern.

Her real parents, Colette pondered, or those strangers, Sylvie and Martin? In either case, the answer was no. She shook her head, a tangle of emotions swirling within her.

"So you just took off on your own?" Renée's worry manifested in her eyes.

"It was the wind," Colette murmured, her voice barely audible. "It blew real hard, and either it blew me to a new place or it blew everybody else far, far away. Things got all confused and mixed up. Nobody has the right name now. Nobody lives where they're supposed to. The magician did it, I think. He sent the wind. Did you hear it?"

Renée thought for a moment. "Yes, there was a wind. I could hear it all night. Colette, would you like me to help you find your parents?"

"The people—they all got switched around," Colette said in hushed tones. "I don't want to go back to those people; they are not my parents."

"Perhaps it's only temporary," Renée tried to reason with the little girl. "Maybe if we go there now, everything will be back to its rightful place because the wind has stopped. When the wind stops, things return to normal, don't they?"

Colette narrowed her eyes and anxiously bit her lip. "How come we're in a different house, but you're still you?"

"I'm not sure. The night the wind began, I was very tired and went early to bed," Renée replied thoughtfully. Then she rose from her seat, carrying her plate to the sink. "Colette, I want to help you, honey. Your parents must be worried sick if they can't find you..."

"No! They're not my parents! They'll hurt me... They'll take me away!"

Renée's arms enveloped the frightened child in a protective embrace. "Shh, it will be alright. I won't let anyone harm you, I promise."

Colette nodded, wishing for the first time that maybe she hadn't used the power she'd learned from her experience with Papa, wishing she'd just let the wind take her, blow her someplace new, into some other girl, maybe that girl named Élise who hated PE and had a Mama named Sylvie and a Papa who had a red beard.

"What should we do?" asked Colette.

"Let's sit down and talk," Renée led her by the hand to a cosy chair by the window. The crackling fire danced in the fireplace, casting flickering shadows across the room. When she sat down on the armchair, Colette climbed confidently into her lap, her arms embracing Renée's neck.

"Don't be afraid, Colette." She hugged the girl back, cuddling her in her arms. "Tell me everything that happened," Renée said softly, brushing a strand of hair away from the girl's face. "Tell me about this magician and the wind."

Colette's voice quivered as she recounted the strange events that had unfolded. She described the magician with his sly grin and the deck of cards that seemed to hold a mysterious power. She spoke of the wind, how it swept through the town, scattering everyone and everything, leaving her stranded in a world that was no longer her own.

Renée listened intently, her heart aching for the frightened girl in her arms. "It must have been terrifying," she said, her voice tinged with empathy. "But you're safe here now, Colette. We'll figure this out together, I promise."

"Can I stay here with you? I don't want to go back. I don't want to go anywhere again."

"But you can't stay here forever—"

"Please?" Colette pleaded, her eyes begging.

"Your parents are looking for you."

"They are not my parents!"

"Colette—"

"I thought you loved me!" she cried out, her voice echoing with hurt. "Why did you say I could come here whenever I wanted?" Colette jumped from her lap and turned her back to Renée, her small frame tense with frustration. "You changed, too, just like everybody else. The wind made you change. Who are you?"

"Colette, it's still me, and I still love you—" Renée reached out, her heart heavy with the weight of the girl's confusion.

"Then prove it!" Colette stood defiantly before Renée, her hands balled into tiny fists, a challenge in her eyes. At a loss for what to do and how to appease the little girl, Renée finally scooped her close to herself, hugging her tightly as if protecting her from an unseen force.

In Renée's arms, Colette always found solace as their heartbeats entwined in perfect harmony. Her head nestled against Renée's neck, who loved the feeling of the little girl's soft breath melting against her skin, with her hands holding tightly to her back. There was nothing more peaceful than this simple moment, nothing more satisfying than the gentle weight of her body resting against her own.

As time drifted by, casting elongated shadows upon the walls, Renée thought Colette might have drifted off to sleep. But when she glanced down at the child, she found her eyes wide open and two glistening tears on the verge of spilling.

"What is wrong with me?" A whisper escaped Colette's lips.

Unsure of how to answer, Renée did the one thing she knew had always comforted the child. She gently brushed her fingers against Colette's cheek, pressing her lips tenderly to hers. In that moment, Renée knew that if she could do just one thing for eternity, it would be kissing those precious little lips of hers.

Colette shuddered as their kiss deepened, her emotions racing the same way Renée's heart ached with the weight of their shared joy.

"I love you, Colette. No matter what happens, always remember that," she whispered when their lips finally parted.

The doorbell rang.

Renée stood up. "Maybe it's someone looking for you."

Colette stayed in the room nibbling chips, but she could hear Renée opening the front, and Renée's warm greetings floated to her ears, followed by unfamiliar voices. But amidst the chatter, one name stood out like a beacon—her own. Mama and Papa were here, seeking to find her.

Without a moment's hesitation, Colette sprang to her feet, her heart pounding with hope and anticipation. She paid no mind to the police officers flanking the doorway like statues, their presence overshadowed by the rush of emotions coursing through her. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she rushed into the hallway, and there they were: Mama and Papa.

Her arms enveloped her mother tightly, her sobs shaking her small frame. Her mother bent down, a gentle hand caressing Colette's back, providing comfort in the midst of turmoil. "There, there, hon, there, there."

But then, as quickly as her tears had come, Colette's demeanour shifted. Her gaze locked onto the scene before her—one of the officers clapping handcuffs around the hands of her kind-hearted teacher while the other read her something like the cops on TV. Confusion and fear sent shockwaves through her as she tried to make sense of the unfolding scene.

"What are you *doing*?" Colette demanded to know.

"They're just going to question her, honey," said Colette's mother. "About the kidnapping and all... a bulletin was put out that you'd run away, and then the policeman saw you go by in Ms. Laurent's car..."

"*Renée!*" screamed Colette, "her name's Renée!"

"It... like I was saying, so then Martin and Sylvie called us and..."

"She didn't kidnap me! She was taking care of me. Don't hurt her, please!"

They took Renée away, still calling her by the wrong name. She was begging and babbling about Colette needing help.

"I'm glad we found you," said Colette's mother. "So glad..."

Mama took Colette's hand on one side, Papa took the other. They walked out the front door—
—into the arms of the red-bearded man and Sylvie, who looked sour and scared but broke out in nervous, relieved laughter when they saw Colette emerge from Renée's house.

"It was her! You found her!" boomed the red-bearded man.

"Thank God," Sylvie breathed, her voice laced with relief. "And thank you both so much for helping us out. I don't know what's happened—if she's on drugs or what—but she stood right in our kitchen and swore up and down that Marie and Claude Lavigne were her parents. Then she showed us your picture. Don't know where she got it from. We recognised you, of course, the Garniers from the PTA and bridge club, but she'd got your names wrong, claiming you were Lavignes. Then when the police called to say they'd seen her go into the house with Ms. Laurent... Well, we thought maybe if it was you who approached her, pretending to be these Lavignes she thinks are her parents, it might help calm her down."

Colette's father examined the photo Sylvie presented, memories flickering in his eyes. "That's one of the pictures that got lost after our trip to Mont Saint-Michel last year. Our son Peter took it."

Colette's mother shook her head. "Now, at least, you can get help for the poor, confused child. God bless you."

"I happen to know a top-notch psychiatrist," Colette's dad offered. "Specialises in cases of delusional psychosis. I could give you his number."

"We'd truly appreciate that," Sylvie replied, her grip tightening on Colette's hand. "I can't even begin to comprehend what's happened to her—maybe Ms. Laurent has been giving her some kind of pills—it seems to me like the woman is a sexual deviant."

"Yes, it appears she took an unhealthy interest in your daughter," said Colette's mother. "I hope she gets what she deserves."

"Élise's gonna need plenty of treatment to straighten her out," growled the red-bearded giant.



"Let me pick a card! Let me pick a card!" pleaded Colette. She couldn't bear the thought of losing her chance to find the right card, the one that might lead her back to Renée. Desperation surged within her, urging her to try anything to get the magician to let her pick a card.

"Please, please, I have to find Renée!" her heart sank, and her voice quivered with pain. "She is the only one who knows me. I don't know how I got here, but I need to go back. I need to go back to her!"

The magician held the deck up high, out of her reach. "It isn't time yet," he singsonged. "It isn't time yet to reshuffle the deck."

Still, Colette leaped for the cards in his hand. Leaped like her life depended on it.

The magician made a tsk-tsk sound with his pursed, purple lips. He closed the cards up into a neat deck and turned away.



In her bed, Colette stirred from sleep in a place that smelled like cough drops and pee. It was a place where everything was bolted down—chairs, beds, and TV sets. They were so afraid kids were going to hurt themselves with something, pick something up, and hit somebody with it that they had everything fastened down.

But the real tragedy was the children—they too were trapped and bound, wrists secured by restrictive straps, their doors locked as if to confine not just their bodies but also their troubled minds. Doctors prescribed pills, promising to anchor their thoughts and prevent them from galloping away like startled horses. But instead, they left their little patients sitting there, their eyes filled with fear, like fragile dolls frozen in fright.

Please make it all go away, Colette thought, her pleas echoing through the depths of her being.

Put everything back like it was.

Put it back.

Colette turned her face to the strange wall in the strange room in the strange world.

She closed her eyes and prayed for the wind to come back.

The End